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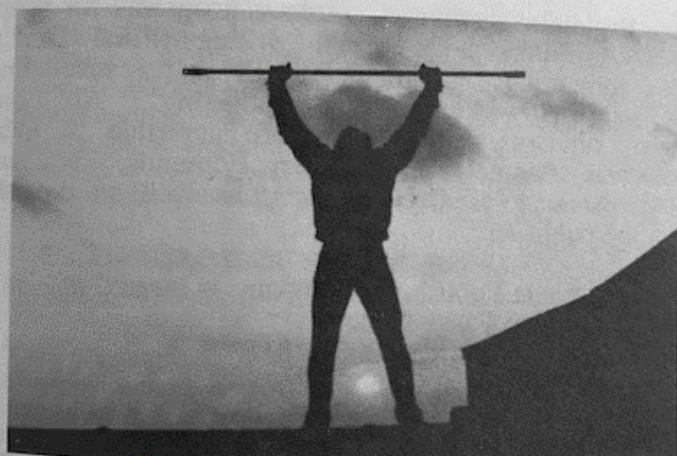


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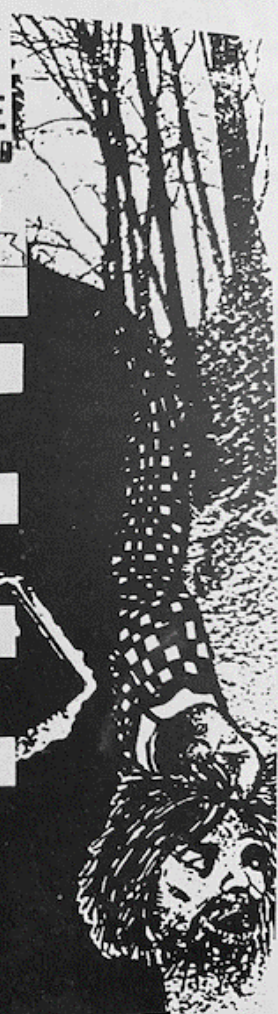
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## WHEN RENTING IS NOT ENOUGH

### When Owning Can Suffice

I don't expect to ever get all of my feelings on shot-on-video (SOV) and trash horror movies out and on paper, so this is one part of an ongoing journey. So much of SOV culture seems entirely rooted in a collector mentality, which positions the film as object over the experience itself. This is not entirely wrong, there are some interminably awful features whose rarity and cover art may well be the best things to say about them. But this also encourages an exclusivity, as who can watch what films is determined by accessibility. I can't justify paying what I see many tapes go for, so I find little issue with resorting to digital copies where available, or bootlegs and reissues. Without a doubt there is a satisfaction offered by the authenticity of the original, but I find myself uniquely drawn to the actual works of art themselves, and especially their place in this unique subculture. So this is my treatise on the nature of this corner of fandom and collecting habits in 2020, up to and including my own involvement.

So why obsess over SOV films? These are the dregs and refuse of horror cinema and acceptable filmmaking at large. Picture quality often distorts to a wash of yellow-green pixel blurs or distorted tape fuzz. Soundtracks overpower dialogue, gusts of wind hit in-camera mics reducing all audio to in-the-red whooshing, and rarely will you find overdubs that aren't special effects. Living rooms, local restaurants and even high school libraries are left untouched from everyday functionality as settings. Costumes are whatever the particular cast member decided to put on that day. Echoing Nick Zedd's call to arms that "continuity to us is when the film runs through the projector," these serve as the truest form of anti-cinema imaginable. The sorts of people, places and things that we have all known at one point in time are put onscreen and the effect is not one of nostalgia so much as the distinct sense of having inhabited the reality being presented. They are often the most authentic films, the most pure in their cinephilia and devotion to the creative impulse. In no other world would a filmmaker use the blurb "Has a storyline and a plot" on the cover to sell their movie. But there's no other world with a movie like Wally Koz's 555, and that's why even that piece of repulsive trash is essential to this overall picture.

In some ways it feels like these movies were never meant to last the test of time. There was no forward thinking or longevity, just the rush to realize the immediate vision and possibly enable the release of more work in the case of surprise success. They're literal time capsules. Which is precisely why the lasting appeal and secondhand market for them is so fascinating on its own.

Sure, it's an easy reaction to think that I'm overthinking these things, and that's something that I've struggled with justifying to myself. There's no question that these films were never intended for serious criticism or theoretical approaches. But neither can they so easily be written off as vapid exercises in frivolity either. There are clearly plenty of other people who take these films seriously, possibly even more than I find myself guilty of doing. You don't pay \$350 for a copy of something unless you invest it with a certain significance, whether it's determined by a collectability or genuine love of the artifact. So maybe this is my attempt to demonstrate the value of a small handful of films to me against their affixed commercial value as paid by anonymous collectors. It's also a way of poking fun at the ridiculous lengths to which some people will go to own the physical forms of these works. This is done knowingly, and somewhat

lovingly, if not without cynicism. I'm not innocent of this collector impulse and spending far too much on unimportant things. I also feel a tinge of jealousy over not getting tapes I want, but can reassure myself in not having paid a week's wages for a movie I already can access on a dead format.

I didn't win these auctions, and I don't own most of these tapes. But I have the movies in some form, and that is where my relationship with them stands. As a spectator and a fan, and also a collector. In my eyes the real collecting is done not via eBay auctions, but by going out and scouring independent video stores on their last legs to come away with gems. Or, even more authentically, by having been there as they were released and acquiring them in their initial run, holding onto the tapes and ad slicks and all the associated ephemera. But I missed both of those waves, got to the whole party far too late to partake, save a few surprising scores in unlikely places. Thus, with mom-and-pop video stores pretty much shuttered across the country, the collecting has shifted to the online arena, and now that there are so many of us who feel they missed out on the first wave, value is generated and what was once a \$3 used rental tape can sell for literally one hundred times that sum. Value is affixed only in retrospect, which is ironic given the \$79.95 cost of original tapes in their early days. I've come to realize that as much as I want these things and still risk my wages to buy them periodically, I can't really see myself collecting along these lines. I've yet to see anything in a VHS tape that would fundamentally enrich my life, particularly when I have the same film on DVD or even a ripped mp4 file. This cuts to the core of the movie itself, which is always what drives my focus and attention, much as I like the idea of having a VHS collection. There's plenty in this fandom that embarrasses and disgusts me for my own complicity.

Even if I had the tape, and among the handful that I do, I know I would still dig out the DVD or digital copy before the VHS, which renders it a collectible rather than a work of art. The biggest attractions are the things that have never made it to any format but VHS—any number of Carl Sukenick's nightmare diaries, Richard Baylor's brooding short features, and the handful of smaller projects made by W.A.V.E. Productions and others. Of course, these end up being the most prized and valued offerings online, so I complicate my own interests as much as I try to rebuke them.

VHS collectors do themselves no favors. Fan cultures in general are often guilty of contributing little to the world beyond their narrow scope of interests. I've always tried to keep myself aware of just what is actually at stake in my own work, why it matters or how I can expand it to more adequately fit into the larger picture of art that matters. Right now in particular, October 2020, things are bleaker than ever and my own hyper-specific cultural critiques seem meaningless. The integration of high stakes capital emphasizes the irrelevance of leisure in a fucked-up world, but I can't really say if I contextualize that in any meaningful sense. Collecting and social responsibility are almost opposites by their very natures. This isn't even confined to a personal level, given the inherently suspect and violent practices that informed the beginnings of museum curation. I don't mean to draw a direct line from colonial exploitation to fandom, that's far beyond my scope. More directly, I find myself questioning my own impulses and actions as a collector, wondering just what is the function of accumulating so many things that I and a few others have invested with an arbitrary value. Once something is marked as rare or desirable in any context, and there's an audience that demands it, the inflation of value is established. I

realize fully that I'm part of this problem, and doubt much will change for that matter. What this whole exercise amounts to, then, is an attempt to be more conscious of what I'm doing and contributing to as I pursue the things that interest me. I don't have a set limit, and as I know well by this point in my life, such things are negotiable. You can convince yourself of anything, and as the stakes get higher in collecting, I encounter these parameters almost daily.

It seems odd, and fairly funny that movies made for less than \$500 (or even \$100 in some instances) command these outrageous rates now. One of the greatest things about SOV and low-budget horror filmmaking is that it is one of the rare forms of cinema not beholden entirely to capitalism and economic circumstances. Moviemaking is the most inherently capital-driven artform in existence. Equipment costs a great deal of money, and if shot on film, stock and processing fees are astronomical. Unions and industrial sectors, not to mention filming permits and actor salaries and every other possible budgetary expense drive costs into the sky before a single frame has even been captured. Films are made to generate revenue, plain and simple. Art films are denigrated for their lack of commercial potential, and singular visionaries are viewed as risks and outliers, rarely given the chance to get off the ground due to their inability to recoup costs or make profits. Yes, art films and the avant-garde exist as alternative channels, but even there one can find a sort of institutional support that is completely withheld from amateur genre works. No one is likely to receive grant funding to make a direct-to-video slasher lensed in their backyard. Close as many SOVs are to the personal expression of the experimental film world, they still inhabit an entirely different realm in their approaches and aims. In these films is an egalitarian potential that levels the field for the handful of amateur visionaries inspired and dedicated enough to their craft to pursue production. The video market and camcorder technology assisted these developments immeasurably during this period, and from this climate these uber independent directors established the most fertile and exciting DIY film movement in genre history.

The things we love shouldn't stress us out, particularly art. Although some of the best and most provocative creations are challenging and difficult and can incite uncomfortable feelings, provoking unpleasant thoughts. But at the end of the day, there is some insight if not comfort to be gained in analyzing just why these works operate as they do and make us feel certain ways. Plenty of shot-on-video features make me very uncomfortable with their limited grasp of acceptable gender roles and representations of violence. That's part of the appeal, that they're too stunted and unprofessional to connect properly on serious issues, leaving just the most excessive fragments of thoughtful entertainment. That's why they're *trash horror*, even as some approach the vaunted status of avant-garde art

I realize that I'm guilty of tending towards obscurantism in my tastes and writings, something that limits both my reach and the effectiveness of my arguments. Still, for as many minute and marginal works that consume my attention, even I feel on the fringes of this particular subculture. Physical media is nearly dead, but with this cessation of universal access to the object comes an inflation of value at a much smaller and more insular level. The number of fans I bid against and who compete with one another can't be more than a few hundred. Yet their devotion, and I would like to think my own, is fervent enough to give me pause and consider what is to be gained from the experience.

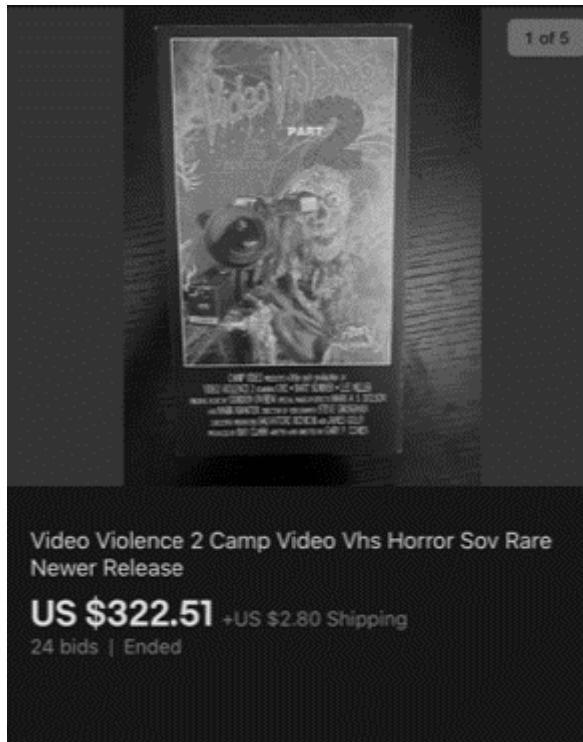
Some of these essays are thoughts I've been trying to sort out for years but have lacked the context to properly articulate. Others are ideas I never knew were within me until prompted by the auctions themselves. It's funny how the sale of a film itself rather than its contents can inspire such deep thinking, but that's another thing that I both love and resent about this corner of trash horror culture.

It should be fairly obvious that I own none of these images. I own almost nothing pictured here in any real form, as it turns out. I expect no one to read this anyway, and hope this doesn't reek of rash judgement. I have many thoughts on these films, both warm and conflicted, and see this as an exercise to elaborate on them. Not all of these movies were shot on video, and I use the term "trash horror" loosely, but I feel there's a distinctive stylistic or philosophical link to these features that speaks for itself. The inspiration for this project came from seeing the prices a handful of VHS tapes had sold for. It happened that these were movies I had fairly strong feelings about and the connection between their commercial value and my own appreciation of them was called to mind. The connections between the pieces are largely arbitrary, although there is the undeniable bond of obscurity, which largely connects these films as much as the tenuously-defined "movement" they've been categorized under.

This is a sort of coming to terms, a reckoning with my own tastes to investigate just why they fascinate me and draw such critiques against the traditional grain. I know for certain that I am not alone in my probing these difficult avenues, but I've yet to see any thoughts that quite approach my own, so I feel that there's reason to put these thoughts down and throw them out into the world, indifferent as it may be. All at once, the fact that so many I love are selling for these prices has made me consider their collectability and relative worth in contrast to their intended function. This point about money and collectability may be secondary throughout, but it was the start of the inspiration to get these thoughts onto paper. I believe the images and screenshots used throughout also can speak for themselves in most instances. Underground and cult fanzines as well as collectors in the know years before myself have given these movies their due and largely pointed me to them. This is not an announcement of lost treasures, though for some I'm sure that will be the case. Instead, I want this to be my own thoughts on some features that I find difficult or challenging as much as I love them. For inherently trashy works, this is fairly straight analysis and discussion, but a lot of what happens in these films is difficult. Whether or not I adequately address that difficulty is debatable, but they are worth the endeavor.

These films are often gratuitous in their violence, but I don't believe it's as simple as sheer abject pleasure or even disgust. Charles Pinion, Nathan Schiff, and, to a lesser degree, Gary Cohen, do something very different with their violence, which breaks from the wanton depravity so often celebrated in trashy films. There's a probing of the real-world consequences and origins of these acts, the ways they mark the victims and perpetrators, and especially the audiences who so readily consume the images. Often, there's an investigation of the violence on the creator himself and the toll this takes on the creative impulse. Beyond this, these films are largely linked by their ineptitude and the resultant strangeness that inflects their worldviews. Even where they diverge from my imagined themes, there are bonds between these movies that are undeniable, and central to this all is the relationship myself and a handful of others have with them.

—Vince Albarano



## Video Violence and Shot-On-Video Economies

It's an anecdote that gets repeated to death within this particular subterranean horror film fandom: trying to determine if the film is acceptable for her children, a mother asks a video store owner if *I Dismember Mama* contains any sex or nudity. He replies that it only features graphic violence, something of no concern to the parent. Horrified by the disregard for violence over sex, the guy decides to make a film probing the hypocritical attitudes of his customers. Gary Cohen's *Video Violence* better demonstrates the fascinating failings of the shot-on-video horror wave than most other films of its kind, and it does so from within the rental industry itself. Its violence and horror contents are too unpleasant and distressing to enjoy in standard terms, displaying the sort of unpolished ugliness that reflects the video market's freedom from censorship and MPAA regulation. But at the

same time, the mundanity of its (often unbearable) interstitial moments is ultimately more interesting and thought-provoking in terms of pure honesty. The entire film exists because of Cohen's insider's perspective of the home video market, which is decidedly not a fan's perspective. Cohen made the movie as a video store clerk who seemed to resent his very customer base and their attitudes, or at the least was bewildered by them, which in the film at least serves to subvert his very function as a business owner.

For all of its undeniable misogyny and various excesses, *Video Violence* demonstrates a strange sort of vitality by placing us almost entirely within the actual retail spaces of 1980s America. Moreover, given Cohen's own role as a video store owner and the film's nearly metatextual rescripting of this reality, it reveals at least some form of awareness as a capital-driven exercise more than a serious artistic statement. Ultimately SOV horror takes on two forms: the capitalistic features conceived via classical exploitation tactics in order to quickly cash in on the burgeoning video market (*Blood Cult* being the most notorious example), and the insular-minded passion projects that operate as means of personal expression by amateurs. Cohen's feature obviously falls into the former category. Though it doesn't quite achieve the effect fully, *Video Violence* often points toward one factor which allows exemplary SOVs to stand out by making sure that even its boring parts are at least interesting to look at.

There's a certain perversity that manifests itself via our consumption of the personal spaces and private moments offered by nearly every SOV movie. This is particularly true of the latter category of more amateur videos, and it's my lasting struggle to understand just what is valid in my fascination with them as it pertains to endless presentations of white, middle class life. So maybe for all its flaws, there's something more exemplary and informative in the socio-economic interactions that *Video Violence* offers in its own less-than-capable manner. This isn't

to say that there aren't touches of brilliance—consider the anti-film within the narrative, *The Vampire Takes a Bride*. A piss-take on the snuff tapes driving the plot as well as an actualization of their very role, the mock-art film offers a subversive glimpse at the terrifying potential of home video better than the rest of the feature containing it could ever hope to do. Even with its fantastic subject matter, the vampire film is a more biting and startling attack on aesthetic violence, offering the violent act-as-terror without getting bogged down with juvenile excesses. It reveals just how the technology which permits Cohen to make his film can be used to create things that are more real than much of life itself, even as fanciful and staged as they may appear. This is a world that would never exist on film itself, and that immediacy and proximity to the authentic is what makes *Video Violence* work occasionally as a horror film.

For all of its mid-Atlantic complacency, there's an unrelenting nastiness to *Video Violence* that remains unsettling. Beyond its blatant misogyny, the rawness of the analog video image imparts a particularly ugly brutality to Howard and Eli's snuff killings. The whole affair is too mannered and competent to simply provide entertainment in the manner of the inept school of SOV works. At no point are there catastrophic lapses in logic or judgement that make the viewer throw their hands in disgust. Instead, the relative polish of its execution makes its class concerns more difficult to ignore as a source of fascination. There's no explaining or justifying the film's gendered violence, which is horrible and several paces beyond the eager gorehound rumblings on display in Polonia brothers films or even Tim Ritter's likeminded film works of the same era. Cohen, after all, was a grown man when *Video Violence* was produced. As awful as his violence may be, there's an awareness in it that denies simple pleasures of grotesque spectacle and emerges as something more troubling. Unglamorous as it may be, there's nothing to it so rigorous as to suggest a critique of spectatorial attitudes as seen in Nathan Schiff's *Vermillion Eyes*. There's no way to resolve the disconnect between simple entertainment and troubling social criticism, and that remains the largest hurdle to *Video Violence*'s charms. Ultimately, the most troubling thing isn't the violence as represented itself, which is inherently fake and "safe." It's the conception, the idea leading to its creation which offers an invasiveness to match the fly-on-the-wall *vérité* of the analog video image.

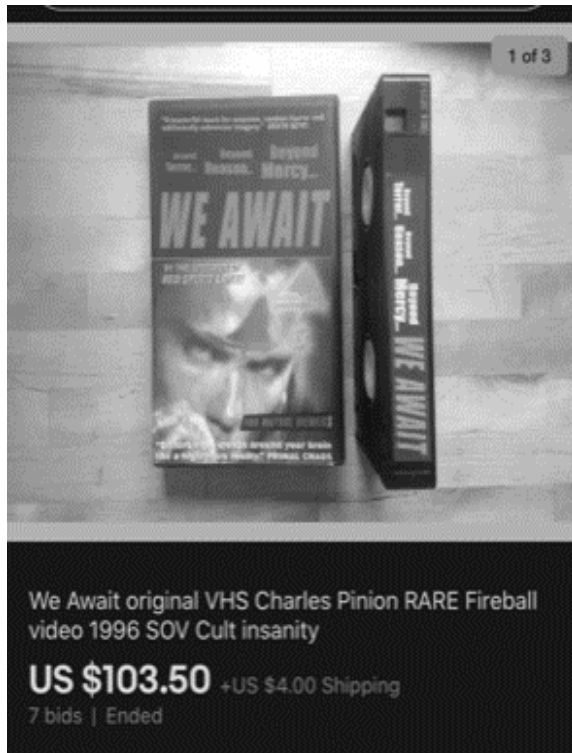
There's likely an analogy to be made about the banality of the film's suburban veneer and the predatory impulses of capitalism against the outright violence of its characters' actions. I'm not here to make that claim because it's beyond the reach of my expertise, and I wonder what exactly it would ultimately achieve. What I do make a case for, however, is the tension that arises between the film's content and its idyllic backdrop. The problems I have with this sort of analysis is that they almost always resort to the most obvious, overthought conclusions and render themselves humorless and of little use. Consumers are devoured by the very mediums they are made to obsess over, rendering themselves casualties of the systems they finance. This does nothing to justify the hideous violence enacted against their bodies, much of which is handled in the most inappropriate and tone-deaf manner possible. Nor does it tap into the decidedly anti-intellectual bent that inspired most commercial SOV products, which exist as crass commercialism themselves and negate the sort of critique that such a reading enacts.

Despite its inflated length of 98 minutes (nearly every SOV feature works best at 70 minutes), *Video Violence* does not overstay its welcome, assuming you invited it at all. It has plenty to say about the consumption of violence but offers few answers to justify the extremity of that which it

recreates. This is why the film feels so claustrophobic, along with its miniature setting in a small New Jersey town. It is also why the nihilism of its conclusion manages to be so convincing and disturbing. *Video Violence* may display some gloss that separates it from other SOV flicks, but it also has an unseemly quality that still makes it stand apart in the worst of ways. As troubling as it is, it remains endlessly fascinating, a signifier of a particular era in film history. Cohen clearly had more on his mind than the mean-spiritedness on display here; the film's sequel is a seventy-minute burst of comedic exploitation, recasting Howard and Eli as late-night variety show hosts. *Video Violence 2* has intentional humor that works, and even takes its time to parody and confront the misogyny on display throughout the first film. Then again, it isn't a statement film, and it would have no reason to exist were *Video Violence* not a runaway hit on home video. The consumers drove Cohen yet again to make a work for their demands, regardless of the subversive potential that it encapsulates. *Video Violence 2* is not a film I hesitate to recommend as I would with the predecessor, but it is also not a movie I can picture understanding without knowing the first film either. All at once, however, its manic energy lacks the powerful charge that the first film manages, and even if it is less troubling a film to watch, there is little substance that sustains it to repeat viewings. At its core is a simple premise, if not mindless then at least uncontroversial. Because of this, I find I don't have to struggle to understand why it is that the film appeals to me, which means it stays with me less.

## About this item

Condition	Good
Actor	Bert Chavis
Sub-Genre	SOV, Comedy, Creatures/Monsters, Cult, Devils/Demons, Ghosts, Gore, Gothic, Halloween, Occult/Supernatural, Sci-Fi, Slasher
Genre	Horror



## The Transgressive Delights of Charles Pinion

Charles Pinion's three shot-on-video features—*Twisted Issues* (1988), *Red Spirit Lake* (1992), *We Await* (1996)—are unlike anything else in that particular style. Firmly rooted in the tradition of Psychotronic eclecticism, but willingly informed by the avant-garde and the breadth of the 1980s punk underground, they are the exact sort of SOVs I can point to when I struggle for something more serious to say about the movement. Pinion is a thoughtful and innovative director, frequently falling into step and collaborating with Cinema of Transgression regulars like Richard Kern and Kembra Pfahler. Still, with their vivid neon colors, frantic energy and intelligent subtextual contents, his films extract themselves from the world of experimental formalism and retain a sleaziness that encourages entertainment over rigorous analysis. Central to his success with the

format is his championing of analog video not merely as a means of easy cost-cutting, but as a revolutionary medium unto itself, worthy of an articulate philosophy and devoted acolytes. The earnestness demonstrated in his “Pulp Video Manifesto” can easily be read (or as here, appropriated) as the starting ground for the sort of intense devotion demonstrated by VHS collectors, pledging their allegiance to the format with each mounting eBay bid. Never before had a director outlined a logical defense of VHS as a means of creation and representation, and this direct embrace of the long-maligned material offered a new form of legitimacy still being reckoned with to this day.

Each film is fairly rare in whatever state one may encounter it: the original video releases distributed by Pinion himself shown here, *Film Threat Video*'s tape of *Twisted Issues*, their rerelease by Something Weird Video on VHS/DVD-R, or the limited VHS reissues occasioned by The Video Pharmacy. Still available from his website are limited edition DVDs, the form in which I first encountered them after years of reading about *Twisted Issues* in various zines and online fan writings. No (legal) digital copies exist online to my knowledge. These are all fairly obscure channels to acquire three largely unknown works, neglected outside of the confines of horror and cult film fandom. They are available if you look for them, and Charles deserves more direct support and appreciation in this day and age, not to mention that there is a certain thrill in acquiring works directly from their creator. Much as I would love to have the original unedited versions on their intended format, assembled by his very hands and sold direct in the back pages of the fanzines I re-read endlessly, I can't complain because, again, it's the art works themselves that most directly appeal to me. And for years now I've had the means to watch and cherish them, pick them apart and let them infiltrate my understanding of underground cinema.

*Red Spirit Lake* is my favorite of Pinion's features, or at least the one that sticks with me the most. It is all at once his most serious and visually striking work, and also his most graphic in every regard. From its opening minutes, there's an ever-present violence that propels every narrative event, haunting the characters and interrupting their most private moments. Contrasted with the splattery slapstick peppering *Twisted Issues*, each act of violence in *Red Spirit Lake* is particularly nasty, rooted in violation and sexual deviance. Unlike *Video Violence*, the mean-spiritedness of these events is in their conception, the real-world analogues they signify rather than their crude execution in the filmic realm. Exploitative as it may seem, I truly believe that there is a function and purpose to their nastiness. The narrative begins with protagonist Marilyn's aunt suffering horrifically at the hands of Kern and his crew, her death allowing her niece to come to the house and encounter the same team of villains that tried to wrest the rights away from the family. Along the way the secret of Marilyn's family and the land they inhabit is revealed, two caretaker brothers make their best efforts to protect her while dealing with their own trauma after being visited by "angels." A few friends come to visit Marilyn, hoping to enjoy their vacation at the lake, and find themselves caught up in the horrific events that result from the dispute over the land.



By beginning the film with an act of violence and allowing it to kick the story into gear, Pinion's film is speaking to generational trauma and the devastating impact of gendered violence. At the same time, the film reaches further back, using hallucinatory visuals of a coven of witches—Marilyn's ancestors—and their murders on the land to reflect on a history of misogyny and its lingering consequences. The violently sexual comeuppances received by the male aggressors—possession-induced autocastration, anal fisting—don't reek of the same hollowly retributive sadism on display more traditional rape-revenge films. This isn't to say that their influence is not felt here, but it differs in so many regards, not the least of which is the actual female perspective represented in its creation. Pinion has gone on record noting that the film and much of its graphic content were the result of an equal collaboration with star (and his then-partner), Annabel Lee. Whether using it as a cover (something he fully admits), he notes that the most graphic sexual acts and violent moments were written by her. Like Kern's own troubling collaboration with Lydia Lunch on 1986's *Fingered*, *Red Spirit Lake* offers a view of sexual violence from a female artist's perspective. How this is impacted by Pinion's own role as director and editor is debatable, but in their initial intent, the many heinous acts depicted onscreen are cast in a light that is wholly at odds with the mysogynistic titillation which defines pure exploitation films like *I Spit on Your Grave* and *Thriller: They Call Her One Eye*.

The film pairs the visceral nature of its actions against a lush, almost psychedelic beauty that perfectly utilizes the rawness of analog video to illustrate the world it creates. The lake of its title is almost irrelevant, given that the film is set in the heart of winter, the entire grounds of the property cloaked in heavy blanket of snow. The scenes of the witches dancing and holding rituals outside are stark and harsh, their exposure nearly bleached into the magnetic video itself. By contrast, the film's interiors utilize heavily stylized colored light gels, drenching the rooms of the lake house in neon saturation and giving the horrifying things that occur there a starkness that is almost physically painful to look at as much as they are repulsive. In utilizing the rural lake house setting of its title, Pinion and Lee address the stark reality that women are not safe from violence or invasion even removed from the stereotypically dangerous clutter of the city, something demonstrated when Marilyn's memory is triggered back to an assault in the city. There is no illusion of safety, whether from places themselves or the very concept of history and what mankind must be held accountable for over its course. The land itself represents a space of independent women, and its violation by the male antagonists and caretakers extends to a critique of gendered protection roles. There is nothing easy about *Red Spirit Lake*, and much of the discussion I've encountered—as with so much other mention of SOV gore—sidesteps the real-world consequences of not just the acts being depicted, but also the intentions behind their representation on tape. Pinion, with much assistance from Lee I believe, complicates standard reception of sexual violence and makes it legitimately uncomfortable to encounter, not mere exploitation fodder. Where the artistic legitimacy of the film as a whole comes in is that its end goal is not merely shock or disgust, but to offer honest contemplation of the violence, not to mention its consequences on bodies and minds. What makes it so much harder to take is that it accounts for so much of the movie's runtime, the pacing of which is clearly intentional.

There's a stripping down that occurs over the course of Pinion's filmography, reflecting in his case a refinement rather than a dearth of material. Each film is roughly five or ten minutes shorter than the previous, with *We Await* clocking in at less than an hour. Sixty minutes, by conventional logic, is not feature-length, but this matter is irrelevant given the fact that there's no traditional appeal to be found anywhere in Pinion's filmography. By contrast, seventy minutes is the perfect length for a shot-on-video feature, and the economical pacing of each subsequent film speaks to his growth as an artist, freed from the standard excesses which make most SOVs so tedious to sit through. *We Await* is, by this rule, the most accomplished of the three films, but it is also the one I have processed the least. I know for a fact that I'll return to it and discuss it at length in the future, just as I've already worked *Twisted Issues* into my writing. The versatility of these works to stand up to all manner of criticism and discussion is one of their most appealing facets for me personally. *Red Spirit Lake* made such a strong impression on me that I doubt this is the last I'll have to say on it either, and that's why Pinion's movies are so valued and sought after. As much as the original tapes themselves would mean to own, I don't think there's any fundamental difference they would make in my appreciation of the content. Their anomalous stature against other SOVs of the period and the way they were appraised as something fresh and unique at the time of release laid the foundation for their collectability. It's rare that underground horror can truly offer a total package to fans, but these three films do just that, and I still marvel at what they manage to accomplish and unlock.



## Joy and Mundanity: *Hauntedween* and the Marginal Slasher

*Hauntedween* is a rare, truly life-affirming film, one I can watch endlessly and lose no love for at any point in time. It is not a work of art, but it is by most every standard I hold a nearly perfect film, which holds far greater importance to me than any auteurist arguments. Its pure illegitimacy as “serious” cinema, not to mention the disregard it demonstrates for anything other than pure entertainment, is precisely what makes it essential in my eyes. Commercial-minded filmmaking—and make no mistake, despite its limited visibility and financial success, it was indeed intended as a popular work of moviemaking—is rarely this honest in its intention and execution. Doug Robertson set out to make not a personal experiment or statement piece, and this is a wholly

noble goal in this regard. I have a great distaste for the wasteful excesses of studio films and their corrupt mechanisms. Hundreds of millions of dollars for a single film’s budget and audiences don’t even blink, unconcerned with what the money could be allocated to instead of capital and entertainment generation. *Hauntedween* operates under the same principles but was made on a \$65,000 budget. That it entertains me more than any film made for over \$10 million ever has is a personal concern, but the fact that it succeeded on its own terms and saw release marks it as successful on any rubric.

Slasher films are not great art. Of those works considered firmly within the style, perhaps only John Carpenter’s original *Halloween* can accurately be described as a masterpiece by accepted standards. The slasher film does not offer much room for improvement or variation, and is perhaps the most obvious example of a formulaic film style. *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* followed Carpenter’s lead, taking a good deal from Mario Bava’s proto-slasher *Bay of Blood*, and cemented the commercial appeal of the artless body count film for much of the following decade. There are plenty of exemplary slasher films that followed, and I love a great deal of them without reservation. Despite this, where these later works succeed is limited, specific to case-by-case bases, with none revising the recipe enough to be truly innovative. *Nightmare* is inexplicably nasty and jarring. *A Night to Dismember* is a disjointed masterpiece of the accidental avant-garde. Wally Koz’s shot-on-video contribution *555* is legitimately deranged and grungy. Michele Saovi’s *Stagefright* is surreal and beautiful, demonstrating actual stylistic innovation even if it amounts to little of substance in the long run. On a whole, these and hundreds of others are features plagued with problems: formulaic constructions, overemphasis on graphic violence rather than plot or technical ability, and most notably a confused and often indefensible misogynistic moralism that seems to infect the very core of the subgenre itself. I can also think

of no other category which falls prey to this degree of hack auteurism and embarrassing stylistic excesses as excuses for a dearth of substantial engagement.

*Hauntedween* missed the slasher bandwagon by several years, emerging at a time when mainstream horror was waning in popularity and even the independent video store boom of the 1980s was in its death throes. As it stands, Robertson made the movie as a non-horror fan, further cementing his work's status as a commercial project, with none of the maddening insularity and referential in-jokes that define so many SOV features in the 1990s. None of this matters, however, as the film's appeal is timeless and lasting to those attuned to the lowbrow delights it offers. Kicking off with the standard traumatic past event, Eddie Burber accidentally murders a friend at a fraternity haunted house event and must flee with his mother. Twenty years later, after his mother dies of a heart attack, Eddie goes back to the college town to resume his killing. The local chapter of the Sigma Pi fraternity is on its last legs and needs funds to pay its dues ASAP. They brainstorm: car washes are no good, and parties with live music don't do enough. Why not a haunted house fundraiser, they decide, inspired by the abandoned Burber house and given the keys by a mysterious stranger one night. Along the way, we get several lengthy party scenes, date montages, goofball humor, and middle-of-the-road jangle pop by local obscuros The Side (who also perform live at one fundraiser). I want the two songs they play throughout the film, but can find no evidence of their existence. There's also a title song for the movie that plays over a montage of the frat fixing up the Burber house. Predictably, Eddie comes home and kills the members and their girlfriends wantonly before fleeing into the night with the promise of a sequel that has yet to come.

I never quite want the final scene at the haunted house to come. This isn't to say the film's third act is bad by any stretch, because it demonstrates plenty of energy and imagination. But the preceding hour or so is just such an uncontained exercise in Kentucky college students (and a helping of thirty-somethings) partying, flirting and sleeping with each other, plenty of relationship melodrama, and groan-inducing beer jokes. What the film lacks, among plenty of more serious concerns, is any sort of ill-intent. There are no morally "bad" characters, save Eddie, and the cast is more eminently likable than in just about any other SOV or slasher film I've seen. Brad Hanks steals the show as the heavily-accented Hanks, a goofy comedic natural who is more concerned with girls and beer than finances and gets in plenty of one liners. Hanks represents the earnest folksiness that makes the film really work and imparts a gentle charm that fascinates me given the trend in later slashers towards unnecessary cruelty and gross-outs. The bulk of this movie is (admittedly white, upper-middle class) students partying, drinking, and interacting with some of the least convincing acting chops I've ever seen—which means that they're truly realer-than-real in their proximity to the cast's lives. There's nothing about this that I should care about or even entertain with my attention, but I love every second of it even as these same situations and people in my own life rankled.

None of the violence gets carried away, and at several points it even threatens to become too ludicrous to take seriously. Nonetheless, despite the comedic strengths of its first hour, this is not a horror comedy, and for all of the illogical decisions the film makes, the final act is played straight. So when Eddie uses a baseball bat to decapitate a fratboy in front of a crowd of

unknowing fundraiser patrons, it feels like a joke, but there's no wink or nudge to give anything up. And in the most talked-about moment of the film, a van explodes following a (very distant) shotgun blast through its rear window. That, too, is meant to be taken seriously, and it exemplifies the sort of disconnect from reality that separates the best trash horror films from any concept of logical comprehension. People hate plot holes and ridicule them as if they have some kind of point to prove. *Hauntedween* wears its many flaws and issues proudly on its surface, and almost dares you to try and say something to take them down. But it's really too concerned with having a good time to let that matter. In many ways, contrary to what I've already said in this collection, there isn't anything more to get or try and apply to this film. There's nothing important at stake, nothing to say or share. Sometimes even I can't think of too much to read into things. And that's fine, because there's a comfortable satisfaction in something being just what it sets out to be and nothing more. Frankly, I'll take that kind of fulfillment over high-effort, high-concept experiments more often than not.

Not every marginal slasher offers such easy reception of its mindlessness. I'm willing to bet that plenty of people are put off by the extended party scenes and bad jokes, and especially the amateur acting. But one thing that can be said for *Hauntedween* and just about every other minor slasher film is that it demonstrates a workmanlike competence that eases the viewing experience along. Very few of these were intended as personal expressions, and a brief glance at the annals of sequels and almost-rans in the style reveal a list of journeyman directors looking to make places for themselves in the industry system. *Hauntedween* confounds this equation, as it was altogether too minor an undertaking, on such a small scale and at a unique point in time, that it feels alien in so many regards. It's a film full of things I recognize: fraternity parties, rubber masks, obscure indie rock, real people hanging out at places biding their time toward graduation. And I hate a lot of those things, I have to admit. But somehow Robertson captures them in a manner that recasts them and makes them not quite relatable, but tolerable and entertaining. I saw *Hauntedween* just before graduating a college where I barely participated in frat parties, shuttering myself and a handful of friends in for cases of beer and the release that trash horror can offer like no other form of moviemaking. Even as I lived out none of its events, *Hauntedween* is a film that can unlock a particular joy I found in cinema at that point in time, one which has evolved and changed, but remains a crucial part of how I approach these types of work to this day.

About this item	
Condition	Very Good
Movie/TV Title	BLOOD CULT
Genre	Horror
Sub-Genre	Japanese, Creatures/Monsters, Cult, Devils/Demons, Occult/Supernatural, Slasher



## Foreign Scares and Responsible Spectatorship

There isn't much in the way of diversity in the world of trash horror or shot-on-video features. Horror, overall, has largely been the domain of white men, though this is not to deny the place of talented women like Kathryn Bigelow and Doris Wishman, not to mention more recent developments in the genre. Within the cult horror landscape, however, there are so few examples that one can easily get discouraged. Chester Turner, infamous for his pair of SOV nightmares *Black Devil Doll from Hell* and *Tales from the Quadead Zone*, is one of the small handful of black horror directors prior to the new millennium, and is often excluded from many discussions of race in the horror genre. Jess Turner's *Zombies Invade Pittsburgh* also meets

this distinction, but I desperately need to see it before I can say any more. Phil Herman's Falcon Video releases feature a large number of black cast members, and 1993's *Burglar from Hell* even offers a strangely sincere anti-gang violence and racism monologue at its mid-point. But these fascinating outliers are rarely discussed seriously, often relegated to gawking hipster racism and a glossing over of their misogyny more than anything.

Better, then, to turn to the global avenues of horror film production in order to encounter more unique and distinctive visions of terror than can be offered by America alone. Nigeria gave us the proto-Nollywood SOV morality tale *Witchdoctor of the Livingdead*. From Uruguay came *Plenilunio*, a bizarre take on the werewolf film. The most fascinating pocket of international home video horror, however, is the half dozen or so Mexican films featuring clowns, possessed dolls, or animated clown dolls. Often, these films feature little people and dwarves playing the roles of the clowns come to life, which adds a decidedly unsavory flavor of ableism that can be hard to get past. This is a mixed bag, just as trash films' representations of violence and sexual assault can be troubling to assess properly. It's easy for fans to brush them off given the fact that they aren't considered "real" movies and can't be taken seriously. But with that also comes a distinct lack of nuance or sensitivity in depicting their horrors. There isn't an easy answer in this case, with maybe the only justifiable saving grace being how straight these films play their outlandish subject matter, never looking down on the actors or the audience. Because of this, the nature of these movies is too bizarre and absurd for me to even begin to consider that drawback before fully comprehending just what is going on onscreen. Unfortunately, I feel that day may never entirely come, leaving me to marvel over them endlessly on my own time. I've done as much research as I can and still have found no explanation for why this specific plot device became popular enough to constitute a miniature trend, but I've never been more thankful for my own confusion than here. All that exists is retrospective appraisals of the films' weirdness and short blurbs in Spanish, with one or two actor interviews that reveal little of substance.

As a result, I have little hard evidence to support these connections, but I'm too fascinated by this sub-subgenre to just keep these thoughts to myself. The earliest example I can find is *Vacaciones de terror*, released in 1989, seemingly to great success in Mexico as well as seeing U.S. distribution, as I've found both Spanish-language memes online mentioning the film and a period-specific review in an issue of *Gore Gazette*. Ostensibly a rip-off of *Child's Play*, *Vacaciones* is a PG family feature, and while bizarre, comes nowhere near the mindfucking strangeness of the later clown doll films. Directed by legacy filmmaker René Cardona III, the film deals with a witch gaining revenge for her death at the stake by possessing a porcelain doll and causing havoc for a family on vacation at a cabin. Pretty straightforward, lightweight stuff, but the doll is an inspired touch and adds a disconnected weirdness that makes a greater impression. The film was popular enough to receive a sequel in 1991 that upped the ante for possessed doll carnage and threw the proceedings further off the rails of believable filmmaking.

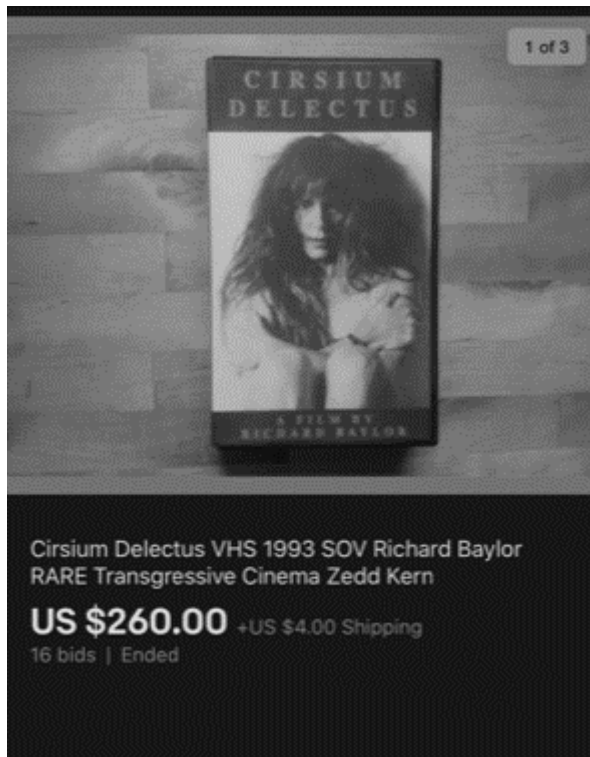
From what I can tell, the next film in this line was 1990's *Al filo del terror*, which is the most inspired and striking of the entire cycle. *Al filo del terror* seems to have been a fairly prominent film, given the number of theatrical lobby card posters I've come across online, and it's easy to see why it made such an impression. El Griego is a famous television ventriloquist who performs with a group of ventriloquist dummies painted as miniature clowns, complete with a rainbow variety of colored afro wigs. As his career wanes, he becomes angrier and takes his rage out on his family, as well as the dolls themselves, who he keeps in several trunks in his basement. His daughter, processing the trauma of her father's violent outbursts, befriends the dolls who only she can see are alive. Most of the movie is El Griego shouting at his family or performing on television, with scenes of Sally being consoled by the animated puppets. For all of its static runtime, however, the film mounts to a mind-blowing conclusion as the dolls take their revenge on the bitter ventriloquist. This involves Sally dressing and making herself up in their image, a claustrophobic confrontation in the basement storage room, and scores of little people-clown-dolls breathing fire and attacking their master. Incredible stuff, and a completely singular approach to the subject in just how straightforward the film plays out, occupying the form of a melodrama for most of its length. This is the one film in this sub-sub-category to seek out if one must, and the impact of its unhinged finale doesn't diminish with repeated viewings.

*Muerte infernal* was released in 1991, and I have no information or promotional material to trace any details of its release or production. The owner of a doll shop and her son are bonded by a near-incestuous relationship following the husband's death. The boy is obsessed with dolls and puppets and is delighted when they receive a package containing a dwarf-sized doll painted up as a clown, bearing the clothing and bowl haircut of a dandy. Yermo, the doll, of course, comes to life and exacts various evil deeds. What sets *Muerte infernal* apart in this category is just how disturbing and creepy it manages to be, yet again dispensing with the world as we know it in its conviction to its subject matter. Yermo kills women, drinks their blood, has sex with corpses. This is all shown in excessive close-ups, with a particularly nasty disemboweling in tight framing adding some nauseous fodder for the gorehound audience. There's not much positive to say about the film save that it is bizarre and undoubtedly effective. The scenes with Yermo seem to occur in a vacuum, feeling cold and distanced from any sort of recognizable world of comfort or sanity. The frequent close-ups root the viewer in the nastiness of the violence itself, which is

nearly unjustifiable and devoid of cheap thrills. On top of this all, the distinct integration of incest into the mix produces a trash horror film that is completely distressing and unsavory as much as it exists as a striking example of Mexican direct-to-video gore. Yermo stands as the single most horrifying of the clown dolls in any film, not just for his deeds, but because the actor who plays him, Aurelio Pérez, is so effective in his role, displaying distinctive talents and selling everything he does to the hilt in his pancake make-up and outdated hairstyle. It's not recommended, but *Muerte infernal* is effective on its own terms. Whether those terms are compatible with your own, however, is what will ultimately matter.

The last of these gems that I'm aware of is 1993's *Herencia diabólica*, which is likely the most well-known in America, with clips making the rounds online and images of Payasito, the cursed inheritance of the title, being shared from time to time. It's the only one of these features that captures the crazed mindlessness SOV horror conjures to mind, and of course works all the better for lasting barely over seventy minutes. Payasito is, of course, a possessed clown doll who comes to life to kill the people he interacts with. A rich couple inherit him along with their grandmother's mansion, and them walking the ground, talking, and being stalked by the animated doll are about the only things that happen. This is essential trash in the most literal sense, the sense that only truly spectacular works of mundane filmmaking can evoke. It's essential because it gets to the core of what these movies are often about: everyday occurrences and life, captured as it was at the time of filming and for those involved in the production. For much of the film, Payasito is either clearly a fake sock puppet, or actor Margarito Esparza pretending to sleep in imitation of lifelessness. When he's on a rampage, his grease-painted face is the perfect encapsulation of maniacal glee, the last thing you would hope to see before he materializes out of nowhere, frightening you so that you fall down a grand staircase. That happens in the movie, likely because those are the circumstances the setting and budget permitted. And that's beautiful in its own illogical manner. I know nothing about Mexico's video or theatrical markets, but it seems that *Herencia diabólica* was somewhat prominent given the availability of cover scans and clips online. Even if it gets reduced to nothing but a meme in the end, it makes me happy that people are being exposed to Payasito and the deranged joy he inspires.

I wish I had more to offer, but I simply have no facts on the matter to contextualize these works any better. For the most part, they work on gut reactions, something true of every movie discussed here, and that sort of decisive—even divisive—impact is what drives me to seek things out, what makes me a fan. There's still the unresolved tension of the films' very natures, and I think there's a dangerous habit in cult fandom of exoticizing foreign features, looking at their deficiencies and peculiarities as cultural miscommunications that smack of condescension if not outright racism. But I can't say that I'm doing anything on my own to dispel this, without a better understanding of the industry in Mexico. Still, there's an undeniable attraction to strangeness in films of all genres, and despite the reliance on disability and difference to make their impacts, the purely confounding nature of their existence is enough to explain if not justify this approach. Perhaps the easiest way to responsibly appreciate this sub-genre is to consider the very circumstances of their conception, the drive to make art so bizarrely specific to one theme. That this results in little more than speculation only complicates this attraction without resolve.



## Richard Baylor: the Furthest Reaches of SOV

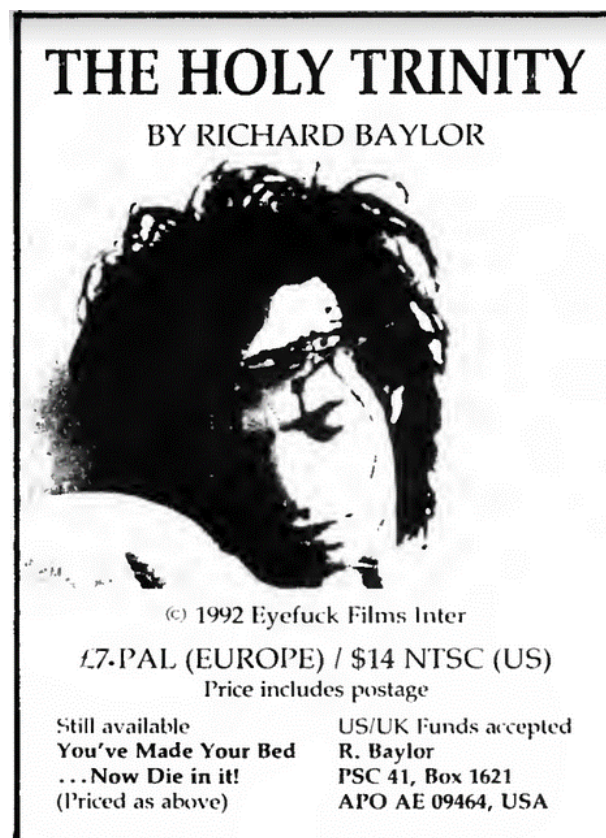
In the age of streaming, torrents and rapid file downloading, to encounter a film that is untraceable is nearly unheard of. Richard Baylor's two collections of shorts, *You've Made Your Bed...Now Die In It!*, *The Holy Trinity*, and featurette, *Cirsium Delectus*, are possibly the works I'd sought after the longest without being able to find. They turn up nowhere online, and searches for Baylor's name in conjunction with any of the titles amount to almost nothing useful. All I had to go off for years were various written accounts thathipped me to his bizarre world. Jack Sargeant's landmark *Deathtripping: The Cinema of Transgression* outlines and defines that movement and discusses the works of the small handful of filmmakers to be directly influenced by it, including Charles Pinion and Baylor. Fascinated by Sargeant's rundown of the

three tapes, I did all the research I could. No DVDs, no digital files, and nothing so much as an IMDB page for the director or his films. All I had to go off of were a handful of zine scans from the Internet Archive, now since removed for whatever reason, further casting Baylor's name to obscurity. Much as I wanted the films and did whatever I could short of giving my computer some lethal virus in trying to track them down, I have to admit that there's a distinct appeal in the impossibility of finding any of his features. For the longest time, I had to content myself with not being able to see something I wanted, which hadn't been the case for years.

I was shocked when the tape went up for auction, telling myself I would do whatever it takes, that I would be the one to win. Of course, there had to be plenty of interest, and as I saw the prices fluctuate plenty, I constantly juggled just what my limit was. This was likely the only way I would see *Cirsium Delectus*, and the fact that most of *The Holy Trinity* was included on the tape made it worth all that much more to me. In this way, the price of the tape itself almost seems justified, if not necessarily desirable. In the end, I set a limit for myself, because as bad as I may have wanted the copy, and even if I could theoretically afford it at the price, I couldn't responsibly justify such an expense to myself. I'm happy for that little bit of restraint. Not long afterward, I found copies of the two programs included, at little cost if not effort. They're cool, fascinating even, but not what I would consider worth the price of the physical artifact. Moreover, in not chaining myself to the VHS up for auction, I have no imperative to make of them anything more than what they really are. There's no impulse to value their contents as more important to me than they ultimately feel just to allow my mind some peace at the missing chunk of cash I nearly parted with. As it stands now, I need to spend some more time with Baylor's work before I have anything in-depth to share.

Going from first impressions alone, “Dum Dum” from *You’ve Made Your Bed...* made the biggest impression on me initially, probably due to my interest in anything involving puppets or dummies. In telling the brief, sad tale of a man in love with a department store mannequin, I think it also offers one of the better depictions of unhealthy obsession I’ve seen from an underground which is more or less defined by that concept. Split almost evenly between color and B/W, all of Baylor’s shorts were shot on NTSC video, then transferred to PAL for editing and post-production, giving them a strange, almost filmlike look that dispenses with the “unprofessional” rawness of analog video. Not to say that they are anywhere near hi-fidelity, but the transfer process imparts his images with a unique appearance that compliments his distinctive style and concerns. Even if I find myself with little articulate to say about Baylor’s work at this stage, there’s no denying that his voice and work are unique among the early-1990s film underground. Retaining elements of narrative and avant-garde cinema, as well as the fixations of trash horror and the Cinema of Transgression, these three tapes display a blend of style and influences that converge to offer a highly personalized approach to filmmaking. More and more I find myself drawn to singular experiences, films that lay bare the subjectivity behind their conception and execution, revealing a thematic identity that interests me far more than any discussions of traditional auteur theory on an industrial scale ever could.

As it turns out, Baylor’s story is nearly as fascinating as his films themselves, having grown up in a very small Michigan town, closer to a religious commune it would seem. Regularly witnessing obscure and frightening rituals, people speaking in tongues, exorcisms, and even snake-handling, Baylor’s upbringing speaks to a sort of homegrown religious fanaticism more fervid than Nick Cave could ever hope to scratch at. None of the interviews with him betray any bitterness or resentment of this, but there’s no doubt that it irreparably impacted his worldview, infecting his filmed works as well. Exposed to the Cinema of Transgression and punk rock following his escape from home, Baylor ultimately fled to England and immersed himself in the music and film scene there. His status as an expatriate filmmaker no doubt added to his legacy of obscurity. There are ads for Baylor’s work scattered throughout the fanzines he was interviewed in, and the mentions of his work alongside Cinema of Transgression filmmakers like Richard Kern and Nick Zedd would suggest that his profile should be greater than it is today. I have no answers for why he didn’t attract more attention, and there are plenty of minor figures scattered throughout the history of underground film. What really fascinated



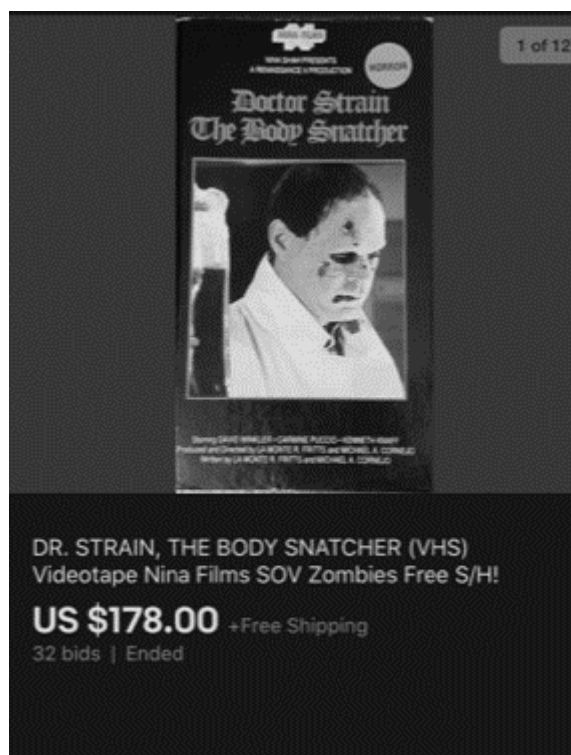
me, other than Sargeant's descriptions of the tapes, is the nature of Baylor's work and his seeming mastery over experimental and shot-on-video styles under the same header.

As exciting as finally getting ahold of Baylor's work has proven, and as exclusive as it feels to actually have these mysterious little shorts in my possession, I wonder what it ultimately means. Digital files are no different than tapes in so many regards, collecting dust on hard drives as cassettes do on shelves, replaced with the newest and latest obsession. I do intend on returning to Baylor's work, to delve deeper into his peculiarities, but I know that there will always be something else, something more obscure and desirable to drive my interests. This isn't bad, and I hope to never simply be content with what I've seen and desire no more. However, checklist collections of art in any form detract from the substance of the material, reducing fully realized productions to bragging rights rather than encouraging deeper comprehension or love of the content itself.

Cirsium Delectus VHS from 1993 - directed by Richard Baylor. This is an original copy of this movie- NOT a recent dub or reissue. Tape has been stored away for many years in a climate controlled area and is in great condition- tested and plays as it should without any issues. Cover and clamshell are also both originals in excellent condition as well. About the film:

**DIRECTED BY POST-CINEMA OF TRANSGRESSION FILMMAKER RICHARD BAYLOR IN 1993, CIRSIUM DELECTUS IS LOOSELY BASED ON REAL EVENTS THAT HAPPENED IN LOS ANGELES DURING THE EARLY 1980's. IT EXPANDS ON THE TRUE CRIME CASE OF THE "SUNSET SLAYERS" AND REVEALS A TALE OF MISPERCEPTIONS, BLACKMAIL, & MURDER. LOADED WITH NIHILISTIC SEX, NUDITY, AND VIOLENCE AS WELL AS A TOP NOTCH PERFORMANCE BY LISA CORRELL, CIRSIUM IS WITHOUT A DOUBT ONE OF THE BEST AND MOST ESSENTIAL SHOT ON VIDEO FILMS OF THE 90'S.**

- also contained on this tape are the shorts "Jesus Hates You", "My Funny Valentine", and "Good Things Happen" for a total run time of 70 minutes. For serious SOV / transgressive cinema collectors- do not let this rare one pass you by!



## Obscurities and Rarities

More SOVs than not simply can't be affixed a distinctive brand and image like the above. For every singular director, anti-auteur or accidental visionary, there are more nameless and faceless one-offs than can be counted. There's an argument to be made that there is an archival function to this collectordom, that buying these tapes is a means of protecting them from the ravages of indifferent history. Of course, it's easy to say that tape hoarding does little to archive them if there's no redistribution, but even in academia there's a restrictiveness to the library process. If I want to look at the handful of rare fanzines (*Sleazoid Express*, *Gore Gazette*, a stray issue of *Blackest Heart*) in the rare books collection at the university here, I have to fill out a form, state my affiliation and research project, and a photo request form. Kept under lock and key—and I would say smartly

so given their age and rarity—I find that less than ten percent of each title is permitted to be photographed. *Doctor Strain the Body Snatcher* is at least digitized and available on YouTube for casual consumption. Once possibly the preeminent fanzine editor, with thousands of international subscribers, Rick Sullivan's 2018 death passed with little notice, falling to the sort of quiet obscurity *Doctor Strain* received for years following its initial release. Now the film is available online for all to find and rediscover. Save a handful of Internet Archive scans and collected excerpts at Just for the Hell of It<sup>1</sup>, the *Gore Gazette* has receded to the realm of high-priced eBay scavenging.

This retrospective function of the fan-collector market is fascinating to me, particularly as I work in my own time to enact some sort of revisionism and draw attention to these most neglected of genre films. There are scores of them that are unheard of: *Devil Snow (aka Neighbor Hoodz)*, *Hellroller*, *Blood Summer*, and so many more. There's no research to be done, these are features that were made by obscure, small-time directors, with next door neighbor casts, released by one-off distributors to local stores or sold direct via mail order. Part of my love for this subculture is in connecting those dots myself, digging back through the pages of fanzines, tying up loose ends of names and the occasional shared cast or crew member. Often all I can find is traces of these films—small advertisements, company names and addresses long since vacated to send money and inquiries. There's more to go off of now due to blogs, modern VHS-focused fanzines, and various other outlets touting the chaff of the last generation's exploitation film market. I would know nothing without these resources, and as much of an outsider as I feel at times, without all of these appraisals and discussions I wouldn't have a thing to stand on. There's always a key to

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.j4hi.com/page15/Best%20of%20GORE-GAZETTE-page1.html>

getting into an obscure area, devoting time and energy to better understanding it. What I like about this particular one is that every day something new manages to surprise me and show just how little I actually know.

There are scores of trash horror and SOV films that I still haven't heard of, and will certainly never even see, let alone own. At the dawn of the 1990s entirely new avenues opened for independent artists and producers, the commercial potential of the video store era turning these amateur creatives toward more insular means of distribution. Some, like Todd Cook out of Texas, turned their visions into miniature empires recalling basement versions of even B-league straight-to-video companies like Charles Band's Full Moon Entertainment. Cook's Cemetery Cinema (later Screamtime Films) sold his own features on tape while picking up others for distribution, like Jim Larsen's wonderful *Nigel the Psychopath*. J.R. Bookwalter's Video Outlaw and Tempe Video released his own more visible Super 8 productions, while also taking chances on tiny indie features like the amateur Nazi-ghost-slasher *Shreck*, all while publishing *Alternative Cinema* magazine and creating an outlet for this sub-underground movement. Phil Herman's Falcon Video released a handful of scummy low-budget crime and horror pictures and carved out their own unique niche. Gary Whitson's W.A.V.E. Productions offered custom SOV features made from requests by private collectors and retained the master copies of these near-fetish tapes to sell to horror fans. Even deeper into this world is the realm of actual custom-order fetish videos with horror themes offered by a score of unremembered little production houses. Charles Pinion got started by selling his own tapes one-by-one to interested parties via fanzines, and there are hundreds of others who drew none of his notoriety, littering the pages of various underground resources like *Film Threat Video Guide*, *Draculina*, and *Independent Video*. There's an entire netherworld of these sorts of obscurities which saw only the most minor form of direct mail order business and distribution. Some companies adapted with the times, with Ron Bonk's Salt City Video morphing into Sub Rosa Studios, who still release new SOV trash films and reissue essential works from the first wave to tape and disc. For every micro-film forever lost to time, there are still people working hard to bring these lost treasures out of the vaults, and I would be completely lost in my fandom and scholarship without these efforts.

I've had *Dr. Strain* downloaded for at least a year now and haven't watched it. Don't know when I will or what I'll make of it when I do. The files accumulate, just like tapes and discs, and the focus is less on what I make of the art itself than hunting it down. Maybe the instant access makes me appreciate things less, not having invested time and money into something rendering it a distraction rather than a priority. But then again, I've done the same with physical copies that took me weeks or months to track down too. So more likely, it's a personal matter, my own priorities and sense of distracted spectatorship interfering with the things I tell myself I love most of all. That hasn't bothered me too much up to this point, but I do think it's worth considering just how I approach these things, especially as I take the time to write all of these words but not watch the film. Sometimes there's a unique satisfaction in writing about something I haven't seen, not under the guise of claiming authority on the matter, but rather in finding something larger within the cultural context of its production to discuss. The processes by which some films are successful, and others marginal and forgotten, is more interesting than a good amount of SOV flicks. That inconsistency is part and parcel of the experience and separates this

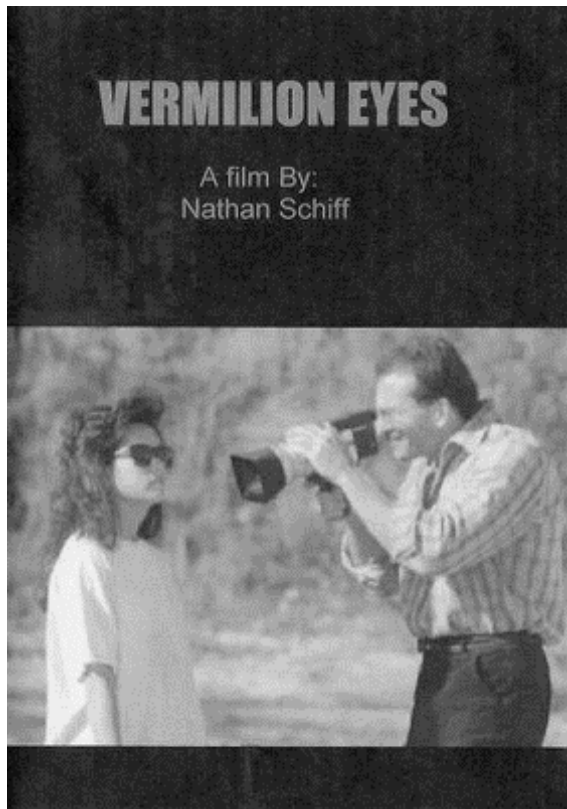
compulsion from regular badfilm “appreciation.” Fun as the worst trash horror films are to watch with crowds and denigrate, I love the insular experience of watching these quiet passion projects alone.

As with any other sort of obsessive fandom, there’s a thrill of discovery, of coming across something fascinating and unheard of that feels uniquely yours. There’s also the appeal of finally getting your hands on something you’ve wanted for the longest time. The trouble is, when the cost of that is hundreds of dollars, I have trouble bringing myself to accept that the physical artifact is any more desirable than the content itself in whatever means are available. There are always arguments that the internet makes things too easy, too available—whether that be information and access to music or movies that took others years to track down in person, or rips of films uploaded to torrent sites or YouTube. I understand this and realize that there is a romantic notion to authentic cultural products, the thrill of exclusivity and propriety.

The egalitarian function of the Poor Image offers an entirely different sort of romanticism at odds with the hoarding impulse of most collectordom. Maybe my fandom is suspect for all of the files I have on hard drives rather than rare physical copies on shelves. I just find myself questioning the intersection of fandom and commerce now in particular. Resorting to online auctions and seeing the prices people are willing to pay for even the most anonymous films on tape, I can’t help but feel some measure of discomfort or disgust. What anyone does with their own money is up to them, and just because a piece of paper or worn out videocassette sells for two hundred dollars doesn’t invalidate their attachment to it. I’ve just seen myself come so close to that point, and, having backed off (or lost out) at the last minute, I leave myself to wonder what exactly is gained. I also want to stop myself from judging the tastes and priorities of anyone else, given that we’re likely more similar than not.

At the end of the line, somewhere, I suppose I’m grasping for a responsible collection habit, which I don’t think is impossible. I just arrived too late to the trend to meaningfully interact with this lost era of underground culture. In some ways, I’m fortunate though, because whenever I get the itch to finally watch *Dr. Strain the Body Snatcher* or *Neighbor Hoodz*, I have the ability. And very likely, I’ll find that the movie itself pales in comparison to the video cover or the blurbs and plot synopsis. Sometimes the things doing their best to sell you on the artefact are that much more entertaining than the thing itself. As for me, I’d rather find that out at no added financial burden upon myself.





"I felt there was a dead-end to the kind of films I was making...I was losing sight of reason in favor of result and so I decided to make Vermillion Eyes."—Nathan Schiff

### Backyard Nightmares and the Obscure Original

Some films just never seem to surface, even after they've been released legitimately. There are blurbs for the Super 8 masterpieces of Nathan Schiff in the zines of the day—a *Deep Red* profile, an impossible to find *Draculina* interview, later interviews in U.K. mags *The Dark Side* and *In the Flesh*. After 1980s screenings of Schiff's first three features in NYC, Rick Sullivan announced a coming to terms for video sales of Schiff's films in a late issue of his *Gore Gazette*, something that never seemed to materialize before its demise in 1994. All mention the fact that Schiff's films saw micro, self-hosted screenings in his local Long Island, and some mention the direct sale of VHS copies much in the way that Pinion, Kern, and

Richard Baylor operated, meaning that these duped tapes made their rounds and into the right hands. There are even ads in *Fangoria*, revealing that Schiff was peddling his hidden classics to the largest contingent of horror fandom in the world at one point in time. But I've never seen a single copy turn up online, or even so much as a mention of their existence in recent years. This is why it's all the more remarkable that Image Entertainment released his first three films—*Weasels Ripped My Flesh*, *The Long Island Cannibal Massacre*, and *They Don't Cut the Grass Anymore*—in lavish DVD editions in 2004. His fourth, the incredible *Vermillion Eyes*, was electively excluded despite being remastered and restored, having been deemed too troubling and disturbing for release. It is, but is also the most essential of his films and possibly all amateur horror cinema, yet remains unavailable in any legitimate form, as it always has.

At the outset, Schiff represented the amateur fan cinema better than anyone, save Tim Ritter's contemporaneous *Day of the Reaper* (which unlike Schiff's case resulted in a legitimate, high-profile career in filmmaking for Ritter). The films were made for allowance money on backyard sets for the sheer purpose of creative energy and to entertain friends and family. There's no commercial savviness, and seemingly no penetration of outside ideologies or themes beyond actualizing his own constructed narratives and visions. The demand for the films was low because the cult horror audience—let alone one that would tolerate the unskilled craftsmanship—was still developing its unique identity. This was all at the outset of the SOV phenomena, and while his works were still literal films, Schiff's distinct lack of finesse and his casts' dearth of convincing abilities were still impenetrable beyond their graphic gore. There was no cultivated sensibility to elevate the works beyond their own simple charms, and only with time would the cult horror masses come to embrace features so disconnected from traditional

cinematic standards. Not to say that his films weren't well-received by those who saw them, this was clearly not the case, they just often seem more of a piece with the later SOV amateur works and even moments from the Cinema of Transgression in their Super 8 convictions, as much as they may resemble homemade H.G. Lewis efforts. Despite the profile he attracted, not to mention the technical and aesthetic sophistication of *Vermillion Eyes*, you can draw a through-line from Schiff to the fan-made tapes of the 1990s and beyond, best exemplified by Jim Larsen's *Nigel the Psychopath*. I can't say what one of those tape dubs would sell for today, and see little point in speculating beyond the fact that it would be high.

Schiff's first two films, *Weasels Rip My Flesh* (1979) and *The Long Island Cannibal Massacre* (1980) are largely what hold his reputation in place. Manic bursts of teenage energy, they offer the sheer, unfettered joy of unsupervised youth realizing the insurmountable task of completing passionate feature-length films. That they happen to be wildly gory and shockingly inventive for all of their budgetary limitations and unconcern with cinematic convention only furthers their vitality as genre film outliers. In between the ludicrous titles, which are ably matched by their onscreen contents, and the second-thought dialogue, there is a definitive impressiveness in Schiff's ability to fully contain the intensity of his visions onto the small-grade film stock and present the outside world with a complete package. There are papier-mâché weasels, torn and crushed extremities, a chainsaw battle with a deformed green-headed mutant, and eighteen-year-olds playing police detectives. None of this matters for its incredulity, but rather because it represents the inexhaustible energy of youthful inspiration. Even viewed as an adult, there's an exhilarating ballsiness to the films' audacity as well as the director's conviction to the material knowing that only a small handful of the horror faithful would receive them.

I don't particularly like *They Don't Cut the Grass Anymore*, but it also seems like that was never the intent to begin with. Five years removed from his prior film, Schiff had clearly matured beyond the teenaged glee of his earliest output. With this comes a broadening of the film's palette to include awkward social commentary on class interactions and yuppie society, as well as a mean-spirited sort of slapstick humor that fails to connect by virtue of the ugliness of the violence. It deals in broad stereotypes to depict the seeming incompatibilities of its murderous hick gardeners and middle-class victims to connect and realizes this strife via graphic bloodletting. In the middle of the film, after killing a customer, Billy Buck and Jacob proceed to dismantle the corpse for an interminable length of time, stripping the skull of all flesh, disemboweling it and playing with the organs, reducing the body to a mess of tattered offal. The act is completely devoid of any sexual motivations and is drawn out to such an excruciating length that it essentially recalls an Aktion performance by Hermann Nitsch. It's repetitive and so prolonged that even the most jeering of gorehounds would find themselves bored as much as I end up repulsed. It literally deflates the movie's momentum and casts any cheap fun out to the curb. I've read Schiff defend it as a metaphor for the necessary dismantling of consumerism, but I don't particularly buy that myself. At the same time, it never comes off as him defending his choice, which even he seems somewhat uncomfortable with in its ludicrous extremity.

*Vermillion Eyes* is something else entirely, an unshakeable cinematic deathtrip that brings the slasher and psychological thriller genres to their breaking point. It is also perhaps the most

impressive expression of amateur underground horror filmmaking. At once a send-off to the exuberant splatter film style that informed his previous works as well as a lacerating self-examination that emerges as a profoundly unsettling metatextual interaction with the cinematic form itself. It is also a fundamental example of aesthetic sadism, offering up the negative joys of “bad” or inept filmmaking only to deny any ironic appreciation by the sheer audacity and extremity of its content and vision. It's a rare film that is seemingly awkward in construction and execution, yet completely sincere in intent, managing to hit a nerve as a disturbing and singular experience despite these flaws. *Vermillion Eyes* gets under your skin by virtue of its vile content as well as its unexpected solemnity. Even if you aren't familiar with the ludicrous splatter of Schiff's earlier works, the feel is just wrong for something that plays like another backyard effort on the surface while mining the deep roots of cinematic misogyny and violence in a manner unseen at the time. There's an invasive home movie quality from the very start, injecting a nasty domesticity that pairs with John Smihula's cold performance. In its current illicit availability, the near-indecipherable blur of the photography—bleached via video degradation and replication—suits the proceedings all too well.

There's no ignoring the misogyny that drives the film's narrative—not in the attitude of the director himself, but rather his character's mindset and interactions with the world he inhabits. The film's unnamed protagonist wanders a similarly anonymous world, traversing the countryside, finding himself returning time and again to a desolate beach, and occupying his dim, womblike home space. As he goes about his life, the Man finds dead women and children—victims of accidents, suicides, and possibly even murders—and dresses himself in a clean white hazmat suit to film their remains on Super 8. He argues with his sister, abandons his fiancé, films and insults a blind woman at the beach, doses another woman with LSD and alternately comforts and berates her. The violence is psychic as much as purely physical, and the hideous tolls of each side are explored but never resolved. Ultimately he kills—or at least is present at the scenes of several hideous murders executed by a black-horned monster and the white-suited double self. It is dense, convoluted, and confusingly structured, but the fact remains that the core of the film is the Man's interactions with the world around him and his obsession with death and sex. All of these things are manifested via his interactions with the women in his life.

The women have no names, only roles, but so too is the man robbed of his identity beyond his actions and psychological cues. As much as this denies any sort of humanization for the film's characters, it also removes narrative specificity from the equation and allows the film to operate in a more dreamlike manner, an early establishment of its avant-garde concerns. To be truly subversive, it is necessary to work against the mode of filmmaking being attacked. We are presented with nothing but the Man's perspective and experiences, but that does not mean we are expected to align with his worldview or root for him in his psychic journey. In fact, the overall effect is far closer to being trapped in his subconscious, forced along for the near-two-hour runtime to witness everything in stride. There are plenty of slasher films that put the viewer in the shoes of a male killer, and I don't think a single one endorses his actions. In *Vermillion Eyes*, however, the question of identification or sympathy is nonexistent, and even where the Man's actions are questioned, there is never a doubt as to their repugnance. Viewer judgements are

subjective, but the overall exhaustion and emotional non-catharsis the picture encourages makes a clear enough point on its own.

Not to delve too far into the theoretical rabbit hole, but there's such an incredible overlap with *Vermillion Eyes* and Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" that it bears mentioning. In defining the concept of the gaze and traditional cinema's operation as an entity which subjugates women to violence via the camera apparatus, Mulvey met the slasher genre head-on years before it had even fully emerged. Schiff's character not only fantasizes over women and their deaths, but in recording their demises through the lens of his camera, he enacts a referential reconstruction of the very paradigm at the core of cinema itself. I can't say whether Schiff was familiar with Mulvey's theory or not, but *Vermillion Eyes* can be read very easily as a direct address to her writing. The only reconciliation I can offer is that there is no pleasure, visual or aesthetic, whatsoever to be found in the film. In the director's own words, this was meant to be the "anti-film," the negation of traditional spectatorial engagement and entertainment. As such, perhaps Schiff intended this to be the destruction of the gaze paradigm, taking that equation to its utmost limits and rendering it moot. Mulvey herself would agree with the destruction of standard entertainments, but whether Schiff's attack on genre misogyny is successful is a more difficult matter.

The entire feature is downbeat and oppressive, but at the one-hour mark the film becomes a hallucinatory collection of violent vignettes, initially interspersed with the man comfortably having sex with a prostitute. This integration emphasizes the shock of each resultant act, with the calculation and abruptness mingling to unnerve further. Gone is the teenage gorehound pleasing his handful of friends and family members and arrived is the uneasy auteur offering underground cinema one of its most convincing nightmares. Even agency is muddled when it comes to the killings, and until a specific breaking point late in the film, it is never quite clear what has truly occurred or who is directly responsible. Even as the images of the

hazmat suit and black cloak-and-mask play upon simplistic semiotic binaries, their establishment as ur-themes of good and evil are second to the dazzling experimentation of the narrative itself in Schiff's hands. There are no moral judgements passed, beyond the sheer horror of the violence presented, which Schiff pushes to its limit so that it may make the point obvious. After a decade of notoriety among underground gorehounds, Schiff offered them the final word on both that style and his own legacy within it.

**SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT-** The G.G., after weeks of tough negotiations have finally struck a deal to be the exclusive distributors for all the works of that reclusive genius from Nassau County, L.I., Mr. Nathan Schiff, who over the past number of years has delighted audiences everywhere with his unique style of gore-spewing, backwoods psycho dramas and H.G. Lewis-inspired directoral skills. Now, from Nathan's own personal masters, gorehounds can delight in owning the following titles:

**WEASELS RIPPED MY FLESH**  
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and the world premiere of his newest epic, VERMILLION EYES, that was over three years in the making! Now since Nathan makes a living at being a filmmaker (or at least attempts to), and because we have to make a few bucks off this distribution deal, we aren't able to offer copies of any of the above videos at our usual price, but at only \$29.99 each (plus \$3.00 postage), owning any of the above collector's items is a real steal! Send checks for any of the 4 Schiff titles listed above to Nathan Schiff, c/o G.G., 469 Hazel St., Clifton, N.J. 07011. Don't delay, as the moody Mr. Schiff is known to be quite an eccentric, and he may decide to cancel this distribution deal at any time!!!!!!!

If the film's content is volatile and offensive, its form does little to offer an easy or comfortable engagement at the same time. Seventeen-minutes pass before anyone even speaks. The world is vacant, with never more than two people onscreen or in any given place at one time. It's a distillation of the Trance Film for the underground horror set, even as it expresses little but disdain for that crowd. Sitney's "psychic landscape" informs every frame of the film as Schiff offers us insight into his Man alone. At work beyond probing the obvious themes of sex, violence and death are more intense ruminations on the fragility of life itself. Around every corner is a threat, whether man-made or natural disaster. Innocence is always present, often completely out of reach—from the Man's own tainted relationship with his sister, to his hesitation around the various children that he encounters. Media is featured and examined in its every manipulative aspect, from the lurid true crime magazines the Man collects, to his use of a Super 8 camera at the accident sites and the replayed film and video clips he has taken. Everything within the film and the Man's world is underscored by obsession, fascination, and the tenuous ground that divides the two. It's impossible to truly probe the depths of a diseased mind without wallowing in the repeated perversions that inspire it. Narrative filmmaking seems like a failure of expression compared with the broad palette that informs *Vermillion Eyes*' drifting nightmares. Even the film's limitations of budget, performances and structure emerge as oppositional strengths, innovative and challenging even among the void of underground cinema.

For all of his excesses and the hideous acts he recreated on-camera, Schiff demonstrated a legitimate growth and awareness of his art and its potential reception. That this was all achieved essentially in a vacuum—that is, with little direct feedback due to the miniature nature of his screenings, and little serious criticism from the fanzine world who were more caught up in the incredible carnage this unknown kid managed to create—is even more impressive and worthy of consideration. In its incredibly-limited original release, the film was received about as would be expected, and the violent rejection of his experimental masterpiece led Schiff to shelve it. At no point does the film offer joy or entertainment, and it really does its best to live up to Schiff's tag of "anti-film". There's a question to be asked, then, of why something so unremittingly vile and unpleasant is necessary in the first place. As much as Schiff wallowed in the pools of unnecessary gore and mutilation in his earlier works, they displayed a charming naiveté powered by his unschooled enthusiasm. *Vermillion Eyes* marks his full maturation as a filmmaker, as well as the unquestionable awareness that his time as a horror director had run its course.

Of course *Vermillion Eyes* is going to seem repulsive and inspire some pushback. I'm just one white guy saying what I think is admirable about a repellent movie, albeit one which is far more considered and intelligent than many examples of its ilk. Unlike most of the films discussed here, *Vermillion Eyes* is a deadly serious piece of work, just as it's one of the best examples of an artist legitimately challenging his audience to see how much they can take and question their enjoyment of troubling material. There are countless examples in both underground and more mainstream cinema, from Gaspar Noé's *Irreversible* to Fred Vogel's *August Underground* trilogy. But those films are well-made by their own standards, convincing in their conviction and execution where *Vermillion Eyes* can occasionally seem to falter. What remains, however, is the fact that they are galvanizing and legitimately unsettling, just as Schiff's final feature is, and

there isn't a single rubric for "getting" them. Everyone's tastes and life experiences inform their reception of challenging and even problematic art, leaving it up to pure subjectivity in the end. I find Schiff to be so successful because of the things I see in the films, as well as his earlier works, not to mention the interviews I've read where he makes his intentions clear. This unlocks the question as to whether the film is truly successful on its own terms if extra-textual information seems essential to completing the picture. That's why these films are marginal, because the translation of personal importance and intentions does not always connect with an audience foreign to the artist themselves. There's a sort of coded appreciation one must develop, whether to amateur or trash film sensibilities, as well as avant-garde experimentation. *Vermillion Eyes* is the final word, the apex of all amateur horror. That means it comes with all the baggage associated with that form and the work required to address it. But it also represents an unsettling triumph that forces a viewer's entire investment in the culture itself, and for that probing alone it remains a crucial, if lost, piece of the underground horror continuum.

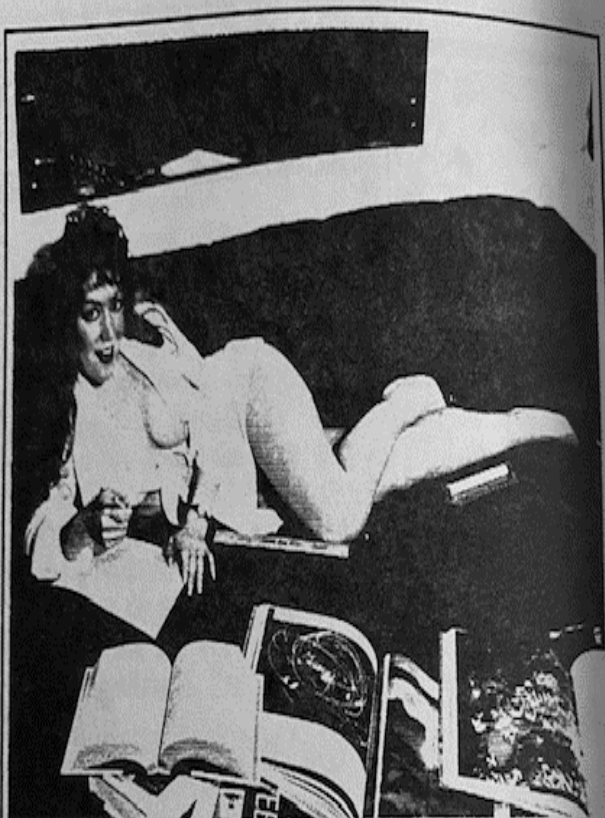


Thanks to PV, EH, GC, and anyone reading this.

All writing by Vince Albarano, July—October 2020

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Directed by Betty Stapleford

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Army Sergeant Sadow has a problem. The Pentagon brass bought a former insane asylum to use as a base for the elite experimental female unit The Lethal Ladies. The problem is that they didn't check the asylum fallout shelter for leftover inmates! Two were left behind when the nuthouse was abandoned. The two freaks wreak havoc on the Army by capturing soldiers and turning them into mindless zombies. Trapped in the tunnels under the old asylum, The Lethal Ladies must invent weapons to destroy the living dead! Watch out, Saddam Hussein...you're no match for Operation "Zombie" Storm and...The Zombie Army!



## SHRECK

Directed by Don Adams and Harry James Picardi

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Roger is a young horror fan living in a house whose previous owner just happened to be Max Shreck...a fugitive Nazi madman who committed a series of murders in the 50's. The boys make up a club called "The Dogs of Gore". On the anniversary of his death, the D.O.G.s hold a seance and resurrect Shreck! Now the teens must battle for their very lives as Shreck attempts to butcher them, one by one, and complete a horrifying ritual that was begun years before any of them were ever even born. It all leads to a final bloody confrontation with Shreck that you will never forget!!!



## GOBLIN

Directed by Todd Sheets

75 Mins. • Cat. No. 1031 • \$19.95

A newlywed couple move into their new house with the help of their friends. But what they don't realize is that twenty years ago, the previous owner of the house--a farmer practicing witchcraft--inadvertently raised a monstrous creature from the depths of hell...and now it's coming back to make up for lost time! The Goblin, set free from its dark prison within the earth, lays waste to the countryside, hungry to mangle or kill anything or anyone in its path. The young people, trapped inside the house, are pushed to the nightmarish extremes, forced to retaliate...or become the next victim of the Goblin!



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Directed by Eric Black

72 Mins. • Cat. No. 1034 • \$19.95

Stewart and his nerdy best friend Morris think they're about to spend a boring Friday night at home watching Stewart's senile old grandmother. But Stewart is the only one who can stop the evil plans of Morgana, Queen of the Witches, who wants to rule the world with her black magic! Stewart's house magically becomes the doorway between Earth and Hell, where every closet and refrigerator door hides a portal to a mystical dimension, where Stewart must do battle with evil forces that are both human...and inhuman!

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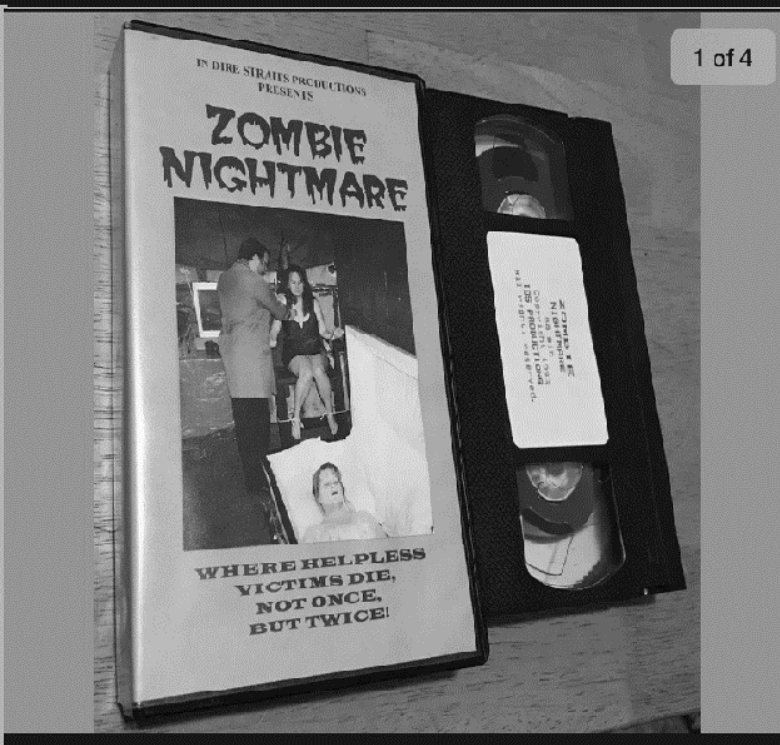
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